

## Featured Dojo-cho, July 2009



### **Max Roach**

Wasatch Academy Dojo, Mt. Pleasant, Utah  
Division 2

My affinity for Japanese traditions, history, and culture has been four generations in the making. My great grandfather was of service to the Emperor of Japan as a naval architect, drudging bays for large naval warships. My grandfather later fought the Japanese during WW II. He was stationed there after the war and my father grew up just outside of Tokyo. –So I grew up hearing stories of Japan’s wonders... and of my father’s teenage misdeeds.

I started training in Japanese martial arts when I was a boy. I trained in Judo while I was in middle school. My daily sessions with a Japanese foreign exchange student were punishing and challenging, but equally inspiring. The throws and sweeps of Judo taught me that power does not necessarily come from strength but from technique and timing.

–I was hooked.

When I moved to Salt Lake City for college, I looked up aikido. I had heard about it during my exploration of Japanese martial arts. I knew it was a softer cousin of Judo so I had a hunch I would like it. I stopped in to Utah Aikikai and met Hugh Young Sensei. An experience I have recounted below as particularly memorable.

Since my introduction I have had the honor to study in America and Japan with top instructors. Each has offered their unique techniques perspectives like gifts. I try to honor my teachers by incorporating their gifts into my practice and teaching. Although I have had many teachers, Cyndy Hayashi took me as her student in early 2008. Hayashi Sensei and I have known each other for several years. We share a dedication to formal Japanese etiquette and culture. She inspires me with her beautiful aikido, joyful spirit, and willingness to share her knowledge. –Which is voluminous. Perhaps most importantly, Hayashi Sensei has been a guide for me through some tricky political challenges. And for that guidance, I am grateful.

Hayashi Sensei has also helped me coordinate with Hombu Dojo to arrange an interview between the Doshu and myself. I would like to incorporate some of the Doshu's thoughts on the sword as a symbol and tool for training for a book that I am writing entitled "Swords of Japan: History, Iconography, and Practice." The book will be a large-format text/art book published by Periplus's, "Tuttle" imprint. The book is scheduled for release in the summer of 2010.

#### My Dojo:

I count myself as one of the luckiest martial arts teachers in the world. I am the Dean of the Department for Teaching and Learning at Wasatch Academy, an elite, co-educational, college preparatory, 9-12<sup>th</sup> grade, boarding-school. It is nestled in the high mountains of central Utah. I have a small dojo and teach aikido and iaido six days a week. Wasatch Academy has built me a dojo and allows me to teach daily as a component of my salary. –So I don't have to worry about rent, insurance, or other business aspects of running a dojo. I slip out of the office at 3:00 PM and teach until 5:00 every day. –Sweet!

Unlike regular dojo, my classes are composed entirely of high school students who have signed up as part of their extra-curricular studies. Therefore the focus of my instruction is on the fundamentals of aikido. Despite the limited time in which I have to work with students, I have been deeply impressed by some students' commitment to training. Many elect to train in iaido, an art of Japanese swordsmanship, to complement their study of aikido. As Wasatch Academy students come from all over the world (33 countries) and the US (22 States), they disperse like seeds in the wind upon graduation. Once in a while, I have old students come back for some training, a particular treat. But for the most part, they go off to study in college and find new dojo to study in. Whenever possible, I recommend a CAA dojo. Who knows, maybe one will join your dojo!

#### ***My most Memorable Aikido Experience***

I remember being struck by the stark white dojo. It was laid out in a traditional manner, which appealed to me. I was glad to see that there were no

ornate golden dragons painted on the walls. In short, I could tell that it was not a “McDojo,” rather a serious place for the study of traditional Japanese ways. The sense of community and safety were obvious. I immediately recognized throws being done in a safe and controlled way. But most memorable was the fluidity that Young Sensei moved with. His technique was remarkably fluid. I was in a state of disbelief. How could an attacker be so easily unbalanced? I was suspicious but even more curious.

He welcomed me on to the mat and I had my first lesson. Rolling and throwing, locking and pinning, I found myself swelling with the happiness that comes from quality practice. The class was a beginners’ section so I was not able to really “turn it on.” But after class, Young Sensei asked me about my background. I told him that I had studied judo before and that I had also competed in competitive fighting as a child. I respectfully expressed some disbelief about the effectiveness of the techniques we had studied (classic mistake). He invited me to attack him full speed.

He moved in anticipation of every attack I made. For several minutes, he did not touch my attacks other than to redirect them. I knew I was at his mercy. But, being young and prideful, I attacked all the harder. His smile and upright non-combative posture told me that he was enjoying our session. He began to throw me. -Gently at first but with increasing force. Having studied Judo, I understood... Get up and attack again. After many throws I was out of breath. Young Sensei gently assisted me to the ground, pinning me down. While we (I) rested on the ground, he explained that the basics are practiced as such and that in advanced aikido, classes were much more like our session. With the same easy smile, he offered me a hand up off of the mat.

I had experienced the magic of aikido for the first time. -And I continue to crave more magical feeling.